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More than Talent Alone

Jakari Griffith
Bridgewater State University, jakari.griffith@bridgew.edu

Colby King
Bridgewater State College, colby.king@bridgew.edu

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Pittsburgh Pirates baseball player Andrew McCutchen is a fine center fielder. With a neatly trimmed beard, a fiercely competitive spirit, and an obsession with self-improvement, he has not only won the hearts of media and fans with his spectacular on-field performances, and his deep sense of humility and positive attitude, certainly the inevitable by-products of perseverance and hard work, inspire a profound sense of popular admiration. On all counts, McCutchen is no ordinary player.

Behind him stands baseball, a sport that evokes vivid memories of hot dogs and cotton candy. It is a sport where fans sit in the bleachers anticipating that their favorite player will slide across home plate to claim victory. It is also very much a story about young batters practicing in countless batting cages in American suburbs, ball games taking center stage on abandoned tennis courts in city centers, and little-league rivalries dividing town and country kids on the central plains. As these examples illustrate, baseball is a cornerstone of American cultural tradition. Among other things, that tradition has always promised that if you are talented and work hard, you will be rewarded with success.

As the American pastime, baseball is often used to illustrate the popular ideology of individualism, and outstanding players are held up as examples of how talent and hard work translates to success. While it is true that the skill levels of professional ball players exceed those of the general population, their stories obscure the fact that social networks, coaches, and financial resources, are just as often defining factors paving players' paths to baseball stardom. In other words, talent can provide an athlete with much needed visibility in a crowded field of players, but how he gained the opportunity to showcase that talent in the first place is an even more basic precondition that sometimes goes ignored.

In a recent essay featured in *The Players' Tribune* ("Left Out," 13 February 2015), Andrew McCutchen uses his own life to illustrate the link between resources and player development and in doing so he challenges the traditional assumption that talent and hard work alone will lead to success. Among his reflections, he highlights how as a child simply being able to play organized baseball and having the equipment to do so was often a struggle for him, despite his nascent talent. McCutchen, who was born to unwed parents of little means in North Meade, Florida, acknowledges the cost and difficulties talented kids from poor families face as they hope to be discovered by scouts. McCutchen remembers that he had to choose between a new baseball bat and a video game system for Christmas. Pro scouts, he argues, overlook many talented players, because their families cannot afford to put them into high-visibility tournaments. "It's not about the $100 bat. It's about the $100-a-night motel room and the $30 gas money and the $300 tournament fee. There's a huge financing gap to get a child to that next level where they might be seen." McCutchen stated it plainly: "If you're a poor kid with raw ability, it's not enough."

There is a valuable lesson here that goes well beyond baseball. Rigorous practice can convert any raw ability into something more orderly, predictable, and refined. However, this conversion process is not created equally. Being embedded in a valued network of social connections can significantly influence how raw ability is transformed into something of professional value. As Princeton sociologist Alejandro Portes writes: "social ties can bring about greater control over wayward

behavior and provide privileged access to resources; they can also restrict individual freedoms and bar outsiders from gaining access to the same resources" (*Annual Review of Sociology* [1998]).

We all rely on a variety of forms of capital (financial, social, and cultural) to help us make the most of our skills and opportunities. Social capital includes the resources and assets that are available to us through our social networks. Cultural capital includes education, style of speech and dress, and physical appearance, and may be thought of as any nonmonetary asset in life. In our daily lives, social capital helps us learn new information and find opportunities. For example, perhaps a friend knows about a job opening at her company that otherwise would have been unknown. We use our cultural capital to know how to "fit in" in various social settings; even knowledge as ostensibly trivial as which fork to use for the first course at a fancy restaurant has cultural value.

Being without social capital is difficult, but so is having a lack of emotional resources necessary to cope with changing environmental demands.

Andrew McCutchen *(Photo Credit: Peter Diana,* Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*).*

Resources such as hope, optimism, confidence, otherwise known as psychological capital, are critical for overcoming failure or setback. Yet, for an individual to draw on these resources, he must engage in developmental experiences that allow him to build these capacities in the first place. As McCutchen argues, these experiences are in short supply for those without a way to access them.

Like athletes, many of our students face the same challenges. Some are disadvantaged in that they lack the emotional maturity needed to "compete" effectively at higher levels. Seen from this view, low college-completion rates are not always the result of normal (and expected) attrition; not all students fail simply because they can't make the grade. Research tells us that there is more at play here than academics alone. Students who feel isolated and detached from their homes and communities may drop out because they have no one to turn to discuss difficult situations and the pressures of adjusting to college life. Students must learn to tell themselves "I belong here," even if, initially, it doesn't feel that way.

These forms of capital help explain success and opportunities in many areas of life, well beyond sport. Baseball players need financial capital to join travel teams and play in tournaments where they will get noticed, the social capital to know which teams would give them the best exposure, the cultural capital to know how best to talk with scouts and recruiters, and the psychological capital to persist in their efforts. These forms of capital are just as crucial for college students as they are for baseball players. Though there is no single best predictor of a college student's occupational and socioeconomic success, research shows that the higher a parent's level of education, the greater the benefit to her children, a benefit that results from a widened scope of social interactions and

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more economic opportunities (Davis-Kean, *Journal of Family Psychology* [2005]). Having social connections with family, friends, or mentors who have themselves traversed the college experience, can have a substantial, positive impact for a student.

Today, we have in America more first-generation students entering college than ever before. We could easily nod at these numbers and congratulate ourselves that these opportunities are growing. But that's not enough, especially when we know that so many of them are navigating this experience without the inherited cultural capital of previous generations. How might we go about creating an enriching academic experience that improves the prospects of those who have a scarcity of these forms of capital? That's a question for which there is no easy answer. But there is one thing we know for sure—a supportive learning environment that recognizes that scarcity and works to provide access to these forms of capital for all students offers the best chance for student success.

At its most basic level, McCutchen's story reminds us how vital social support is to athletes, and to students' success, as well. Most of all, it reminds us of a basic fact: none of us makes it on our own. It dispels the notion that professional success can be obtained by exercising talent alone, independent of related financial, social, and psychological resources. It also reminds us how easy it is to focus on the deeds of "high performers," giving little attention to how external circumstances coalesce and form conditions that make an elevated performance possible. And it instructs us, as teachers, to resist attributing the failures of others to disposition or to personal defect. McCutchen's example awakens us to those biases.

At Bridgewater State University we work to provide an extraordinarily supportive environment for first-generation college students, giving them opportunities to interact with professors whose stories sometimes resemble their own. One example is *Class Beyond the Classroom*, an on-campus group started by faculty, staff and students interested in sharing resources, stories, and support, with the aim of promoting the success of first-generation college students. At our meetings, group members sometimes share stories in panel-like sessions, helping weary students imagine the innumerable possibilities their education will afford, and doing so from a sympathetic perspective. Some members focus on improving the connections between students and university services, while others explore opportunity and resources gaps. The group represents just one of the many student success initiatives taking place across our campus. And the success of these programs continues to grow.

What we learn from the triumphs of baseball stars like McCutchen and the successes of our students is that in life, as in baseball, it is not just about having talent. It's also about having the resources with which to make the most of that talent. Let us all work to ensure that these resources, these forms of capital, are more easily available to all students, so that we can all share in each other's success.

Jakari Griffith is Assistant Professor in the Department of Management.

Colby King is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology.

★*An earlier version of this essay appeared on the Everyday Sociology Blog (2 March 2015).*